

# Chapter 01

## The Discovery of Indian Turtles, with Notes on Publications, Type Localities and Type Repositories

Indraneil Das

Institute of Biodiversity and Environmental Conservation, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak,  
94300, Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia.  
E-mail: idas@ibec.unimas.my

### Introduction

An appreciation of India's turtle diversity, reported as the richest in the world (Iverson, 1992), perhaps would include historical aspects behind its discovery. This essay traces the history of the discovery of Indian turtles, from Linnean to recent times. It retains the original orthography (as derived from an examination of the original publication) and I have attempted to trace all primary types of Indian turtles. Further biographical notes on important collectors and written contributors can be found in the works of Adler (1989), Archer (1962), Bauchot *et al.* (1990), Das (2004), Dawson (1946), Fransen *et al.* (1997) and Leviton and Aldrich (2000).

Appendix 1 comprises institutional repositories of turtle type material and Appendix II is an analysis of turtle names.

### The Linnean period (1758–)

Carolus Linnaeus (1707–1778), in the 10th edition of 'Systema Naturae', described several turtles, of which three marine species are known from India. All were allocated to the genus *Testudo*, though none of the types were collected from India. The type locality of the first of these, *Testudo Caretta*, current name- *Caretta caretta* (Linnaeus, 1758) was indicated as "insulas Americanas" in the original description, and was restricted to "Bermuda Island" (32°20'N; 64°45'W, the Atlantic Ocean) by Smith and Taylor (1950), and further to "Bimini, British Bahamas" (25°44'N; 79°15'W) by Schmidt (1953). Wallin (1985) indicated that no type specimen of *Testudo caretta* existed. Another marine turtle described by Linnaeus was *Testudo Mydas*, current name- *Chelonia mydas* (Linnaeus, 1758). The NHRM 19, 26 and 231 syntypes, were from "Insulas pelagi: insulam Adscensionis" (= islands of the oceans: Ascension Island and so on..), restricted to "Insel Ascension" (= Ascension Island, 07°57'S; 14°22'W, in the Atlantic Ocean) by Mertens and Müller (1928). The third species is *Testudo imbricata*, current name- *Eretmochelys imbricata* (Linnaeus, 1766). Its presumed holotype is ZMUU 130, according to Smith and Smith (1979), although Wallin (1985) indicated that no type specimen ever existed. The original description mentioned that it originated from "Mari Americano, Asiatico" (= American and Asian seas), and was restricted to "Bermuda" (32°20'N; 64°45'W; in the Atlantic Ocean) by Smith and Taylor (1950).

Other sea turtle species were described subsequently. For instance, *Chelonia olivacea*, current name- *Lepidochelys olivacea* (Eschscholtz, 1829), based on types that are probably in MZT, according to Smith and Smith (1979), was from "chinesische Meer" (= China Sea), "Bai von Manilla" (= Manila Bay, 14°37'N; 120°58'E, Luzon, the Philippines) and "Sumatra" (in the Greater Sundas, Indonesia), and *Testudo coriacea*, current name- *Dermochelys coriacea* (Vandelli, 1761), whose holotype is an uncatalogued ZMUP specimen (Fretey and Bour, 1980). Vandelli (1761), in his letter to Linnaeus, gave the type locality as "maris Tyrrheni oram in agro Laurentiano" (= to the mouth of the Tyrrhean Sea in Laurentium countryside), although Linnaeus (1766) gave the provenance as "Mari mediterraneo, Adriatico varius" (= either the Mediterranean Sea or the Adriatic), which was restricted to "Palermo, Sicily" (38°08'N; 13°23'E; in Italy) by Smith and Taylor (1950), and restricted again by Fretey and Bour (1980) to "la côte romaine (Italie), Mer Tyrrhéniennne, Méditerranéenne occidentale" (= the Roman coast [Italy], Tyrrhenean Sea, western Mediterranean Sea), which Bour and Dubois (1983) restricted to "Laurentum, between Lido di Ostia and Tor Paterno, shore of the Tyrrhenian Sea, Italy" (not extant at present and once located at ca. 41°42'N; 12°17'E, about 7 km from Lido di Ostia and 4 km from Tor Paterno).

### Colonial Period: Europe

Intense British interest in the natural history of her colonies spurred explorations in hitherto uncharted areas of the Empire. Prominent explorers included Major-General Thomas Hardwicke (1756–1835), an armyman,